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## **Charles Dickens in Twenty-First-Century India. A Study of the Novel *Q & A* by Vikas Swarup and its Film Adaptation by Danny Boyle**

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When Danny Boyle's film adaptation of Vikas Swarup's début novel *Q & A*, published in 2005, was released worldwide in 2008 as *Slumdog Millionaire*, many critics and viewers harped on its Dickensian overtones, but so far no thorough analysis of the novel and its adaptation has really substantiated this claim. This article identifies Dickensian influences in the novel and its adaptation, and it tries to work out why Swarup and Boyle resorted to these allusions. In so doing, it shows that Dickensian allusions, primarily aimed at promoting the reception of these two twenty-first-century works, have led to contradictory and even incompatible, but nonetheless extremely relevant interpretations of the novel and its cinematic adaptation.

Regarding the presence of Dickensian overtones in *Q & A* and *Slumdog Millionaire*, it cannot be denied that faint but distinctive echoes lead readers and viewers to envisage the novel and its adaptation as loose transpositions of Dickens's novels to Indian realities. The novel endows the hero, Ram Mohammad Thomas, with a Dickensian infancy and childhood. Like David Copperfield, Ram is the narrator of his own life, and his early years somewhat resemble the story of *Oliver Twist*. He too is alone in the world. He is unsure who abandoned him but fancies it might have been his mother whom he pictures to himself as "a tall and graceful young woman, wearing a white sari" (*Q & A* 36). In his "mind's eye", he sees her "leaving the hospital after midnight with a baby in her arms" (36). The scene he imagines recalls the poignant and dramatic opening scene of David Lean's film adaptation of *Oliver Twist*, save that the mother is carrying her baby, whereas in Dicken's novel she is about to give birth. But the action and weather conditions are otherwise extremely similar:

The wind is howling. Her long black hair bows across her face, obscuring her features. Leaves rustle near her feet. Dust scatters. Lightning flashes. She walks with heavy footsteps toward the church, clutching the baby to her bosom. She reaches the door of the church and uses the metal ring knocker." (*Q&A* 36)

This episode is extremely interesting in that it reveals how Dickensian references can be transformed and manipulated. The sequence from David Lean's film has come to

be closely associated with the novel *Oliver Twist* – almost as much as the famous episode in which Oliver “asks for more” – but in fact it does not feature in the novel at all. Chris Louttit has shown in an article entitled “Dickens, David Lean, and After: Twenty-first-Century Adaptations of *Oliver Twist*” that the scene was entirely fabricated by David Lean in his famous adaptation of Dickens’s novel. In this light, Vikas Swarup’s allusion to the scene from David Lean’s adaptation, though mentioned twice in the novel, is in fact not a direct quotation from *Oliver Twist* but the textual rendering of a free visual adaptation of an episode from the novel – the paradox lies in the fact that many people believe it to come from the original text. This circuitous reference to Dickens, via the cinema, nevertheless fits into Swarup’s narrative strategy, inspired from filmic and televisual models and patterns, and it partakes of the inclusion of his writing in today’s multimedia society.

Danny Boyle, on the other hand, surprisingly does not refer to this key episode of Lean’s adaptation, although, as a filmmaker, he might have been expected to do so. He chooses instead to make the hero’s mother die during a interracial riot involving a frantic flight that bears resemblances to Oliver’s pursuit by an angry crowd to the repeated cry of “stop thief!” in Dickens’s novel (*OTX*) – a striking episode with strong visual potentialities exploited in many film adaptations of the book, including Lean’s version. Boyle makes the most of this scene, since one of the opening sequences of his film shows a group of street children – among whom feature the two main protagonists – running through the narrow and dirty, but also picturesque streets of the slums of Mumbai, with policemen in hot pursuit. A later scene also shows the heroes, Jamal and Salim, this time accompanied by the heroine Latika, running for their life to escape from Maman and his men.

In the novel *Q & A*, Swarup’s hero, Ram Mohamad Thomas, further resembles Oliver Twist in that after being abandoned by his mother, he is taken in by an orphanage. Like Oliver, who is christened by the beadle Mr. Bumble, Ram is baptised by the parish priest, but his name gives rise to cultural and religious rather than moral considerations. His triple name reveals an ecumenical concern to conciliate proponents of the three main religions of India, namely the Hindu, Muslim and Christian faiths. The influence of *Oliver Twist* is also to be felt in Swarup’s description of the Delhi Juvenile Home for Boys, an institution Ram is sent to at the age of eight. There the surly cook of the home “scolds anyone who asks for more” (74) and the deputy warden Mr. Gupta, who wears two thick gold chains around his neck and carries a short bamboo cane which he uses to strike the

youngsters, seems like a resurgence of Mr. Bumble in twenty-first-century India, save that Swarup has endowed him with pedophile leanings. Among the juvenile offenders, Ram remains, like Oliver in Fagin's gang, surprisingly pure and innocent. Ram and Oliver both stand out linguistically as well, Oliver because he remains impervious to the language of the underworld, and Ram because he speaks English and therefore is considered by his companions and by the people running the home as a cut above the rest of the group.

Ram's destiny bears resemblances to *Oliver Twist's* in that it alternates between a struggle for survival in squalid surroundings and life in more privileged environments where Ram enjoys the protection of sundry middle-class benefactors and employers such as a kindly priest, an Australian Colonel or an ageing actress. However, a closer examination reveals that Oliver and Ram's trajectories do not quite coincide, since Oliver experiences hell in the workhouse and in the Sowerberry family, followed by a descent into the Victorian underworld before becoming Mr. Brownlow's protégé, whereas Ram goes from the bliss of Father Timothy's home to the hell of the juvenile home, followed by the nightmare of being handed over to Maman and his gang. This descent into the world of Indian criminality is followed by ups and downs, which prove more erratic than in Oliver's story. Both novels however delineate the progress of their child heroes, a narrative pattern as popular today as it was in the Victorian period.

Other peripeteias in *Q & A* echo Dickensian themes: just as Oliver is sold by the welfare board to an undertaker, Ram and his friend Salim are given away to Maman by the Welfare Board of the Delhi Juvenile Home (85), but before being bargained over, they receive a semblance of education strongly reminiscent of Dickensian descriptions of the instruction dispensed to working-class children in *Nicholas Nickleby* or in *Great Expectations*. At the Juvenile Home in Turkman gate, Mr. Joshi's class might well be a twenty-first-century transposition of Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby* or of Mr. Wopsle's Great Aunt's Sunday school in *Great Expectations*: Mr. Joshi "who specialises in burping and picking his nose" does anything but teach, and spends his time instead "reading a novel carefully hidden inside the textbook he holds in his hands", while his pupils make paper airplanes, etch patterns on the wooden desks, and doze (82).

Dickens thus seems to have provided Vikas Swarup and Danny Boyle with a typology of situations and characters whose universality makes them applicable, beyond their period and their initial national frontiers, to human situations as vivid, as humorous and, at times, as poignant to us today as they were to readers of the Victorian period.

Among the characters in the novel, besides Ram, Salim, Nita and Maman who seem to have been based more or less closely on the prototypes of Oliver Twist, the Artful Dodger, Nancy and Fagin, other characters in the novel resemble Dickensian figures. In the course of his travels through the country, Ram encounters a young simpleton called Shankar, whose wisdom in spite of his apparent deficiencies reminds the reader of Smikes in *Nicholas Nickleby* or of Barnaby Rudge. Ram also finds employment in the house of an ageing actress, Neelema Kumari, whose traits seem to have been inspired by Mrs. Skewton alias Cleopatra in *Dombey and Son*, or by Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, with a touch of the faded actress in the film *Sunset Boulevard*. Like Mrs. Skewton nicknamed “Cleopatra” (DS 21) when she was still a fashionable beauty, Neelema clings to the soubriquet of “Tragedy Queen” (Q & A 227) which was given to her when she was still a successful actress, and she hangs on to the paraphernalia associated to her past self, heedless of the discrepancy between her ageing body and her dress and attitude. Similarly, just as Miss Havisham imagines her remains being laid on her wedding table after her death in *Great Expectations*, Neelema Kumari actually ends up, after also having been jilted and mistreated by a cruel lover, lying dead in her master bedroom, a rotting corpse dressed in a rich sari and adorned with sparking jewellery (Q & A 233). She thus reenacts Miss Havisham’s destiny in Juhu, an affluent suburban district on the outskirts of Mumbai.

Similar Dickensian situations and prototypes transposed into a twenty-first-century Indian setting can be found in Danny Boyle’s free adaptation of Swarup’s novel. In one of the most memorable episodes of the film, the three child heroes, Jamal, his elder brother, Salim, and a young girl called Latika, become the protégés of the criminal Maman, who, under false pretence of protecting street children, exploits them by turning them into beggars and sometimes even maims them to make them more pitiful and thus more profitable. The way Maman is portrayed in the film unmistakably reminds the viewer of Fagin and his gang. Like Fagin, Maman feeds the children and introduces them to begging and petty larceny while appearing to educate them or let them play. Furthermore, the child-like innocence but also the ingeniousness shown by the main hero, Jamal, in coping with adversity remind the viewer of Oliver Twist or of David Copperfield, while the resourcefulness and resiliency of Jamal’s elder brother, Salim, bring to mind the Artful Dodger’s skills. These resemblances are reinforced by the children’s petty thieving, performed first under Maman’s supervision, and later on their own devices. Such illicit

activities call to mind the pickpocketing skills of Fagin's boys. As for the young heroine of the film, Latika, her near escape from becoming a prostitute working for Maman, and her subsequent position as mistress of the rival gangster Javed, who brutally beats her when she attempts to flee from him, are reminiscent of Nancy's fate in the hands of Sikes in *Oliver Twist*.

In both novel and film, the protagonists' distress, but also their endless inventiveness in coping with difficulties in the squalid and overcrowded district of Dharavi at the heart of India's financial capital, Mumbai, recall many a Dickensian hero struggling for survival in the slums of Victorian London. Moreover Dickens's work seems to underlie Danny Boyle's adaptation in other ways. The film's rendering of the rubbish dump on which the children live and scavenge after their mother's death is reminiscent of the dust heaps depicted in *Our Mutual Friend*. The visual reality of these heaps is remarkably and powerfully rendered in a Julian Farmio's 1998 BBC adaptation of Dickens's novel, and Danny Boyle seems to have transposed this image of the Victorian period directly into twenty-first-century Mumbai.

Dickens's resourceful street urchins and his portrayal of the Victorian metropolis thus seem to have provided Swarup and Boyle with tools to produce a convincing imaginary representation of twenty-first-century India, which helps readers and viewers apprehend and comprehend the complex reality of Indian megalopolises. The novel and its film adaptation emphasise India's mixture of splendour and squalor, baffling progress and extraordinary archaism, beauty and ugliness. They both depict a country where immeasurable wealth cohabits with utter destitution. In representing such contrasts they both seem to be drawing from Dickensian descriptions of Victorian London, whose juxtaposition of grandeur and dire poverty, so skilfully captured in novels like *Bleak House* or *Our Mutual Friend*, was as disconcerting to observers of the time as similar contrasts in Indian cities are to us today.

These Dickensian references are however more complex than they seem and they raise issues that go beyond the mere understanding and deciphering of India today. The first question which comes to mind when reading Swarup or seeing Boyle's Dickensian renderings of twenty-first-century Indian slums and their occupants is whom these representations target. One may wonder who, if anyone, needs a Dickensian lens to view and understand India today and why. Bearing in mind that the memory and legacy of the British Empire still awaken mixed feelings in the Indian population, it is doubtful whether

the Indians themselves unmitigatedly appreciate such references, which can be associated with the idea of British domination. For this reason, they may not be very keen to use Victorian grids to decipher post-independence Indian social history, no matter how bewildering and mystifying these historical developments prove to be, and no matter how tempted one might be – for want of better instruments – to use British references to decipher and interpret them. As a matter of fact, according to an article by Sadanand Dhume entitled “Slumdog Paradox”, the Oscar-winning film was rather tepidly received in India where it played in half-empty theatres and was considered by some Indian critics as an exaggeratedly negative vision of the country focusing on misery. It was even described by an Indian film professor, Shyamal Sengupta in the *Los Angeles Times* as “a white man’s imagined India” (qtd in Dhume).

Similarly, one may wonder about the Indian reception of Swarup’s novel. For one thing, the novel was written in English by an Indian diplomat living abroad, and its initial success seems to have been primarily overseas – it won the South Africa’s Boeke Prize in 2006, was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize the same year and was awarded the General Public’s Prize at the 2007 Paris Book Fair. Though the novel gives a more subtle view of the fabric of Indian society than the film – it distinguishes between those living in slums, those living in chawls and the wealthy classes – the very definition of “chawls” by the narrator as “a bundle of one-room tenements” whose lower middle-class inhabitants are “only marginally better off than those who live in slums like Dharavi” (*Q & A* 56) points to Swarup’s desire to address a global audience, since in India itself the word “chawl” would have sufficed. In many respects, the novel seems to have been written primarily for foreign readers by an author observing his country from the outside. Moreover, Ram’s repeated allusions to his mastery of the English language and to the advantages he draws from this seems to confirm that the novel, like the film, conveys a sense of British and Western superiority.

Bearing in mind that the novel only gained worldwide attention when it was adapted to the screen, and that the film’s enormous success, which culminated in its Oscars – the ultimate Western consecration – led to the renaming of the book – originally entitled *Q & A* – as *Slumdog Millionaire*, one may say that the film supplanted the novel and, in so doing, imposed its more Westernised image of India upon the public. This is all the more striking as Danny Boyle offers a very loose adaptation of the novel’s contents, which he considerably revises and transforms to make them understandable and more

appealing to a global public. Indeed, as A. J. Sebastian has shown in an article entitled “Voicing Slum-subaltern in *Slumdog Millionaire*”, while keeping the bare bones of the novel – that is to say the idea of a television quiz show as a structuring device and the successive stories told by the hero to account for his accurate answers to each of the questions of the show – the film noticeably alters the questions and answers, as well as the stories which lead up to the hero’s answers (906). These changes and rearrangements, made to adapt the storyline to a global audience, all seem confirm the sense of a symbolic colonisation of India by the Western world.

In this light, the Dickensian intertext in *Q & A* and in *Slumdog Millionaire* can be considered as a lens through which contemporary India is represented, first by a cosmopolitan Indian diplomat influenced by the West, and then by a British film director, albeit seconded by an Indian co-director. In this respect, it is worth noting that the name of this co-director, Loveleen Tandan, is far less frequently mentioned than Danny Boyle’s name in reviews of the film, which in itself may be indicative of a primarily Eurocentric perspective. Loveleen Tandan’s role is said to have been to advise Boyle on Indian realities and help avoid cultural blunders in the making of the film. However, in spite of this precaution, and though some details of the film scrupulously follow Indian culture, its overall plot and interpretation do not seem to have appealed to the Indian population, who objected to the image the film gave of itself and of the country. While *Slumdog Millionaire* makes allowances to Indian culture and feelings, it nonetheless adopts an overall Western point of view, exemplified by the Dickensian input. This “Westernisation” of India may account for the indifferent, when not hostile, reception met by the film when it was released in India. The Indians were particularly appalled by the sequence depicting communal latrines, which they deemed degrading and, considering their reaction to the film, they were presumably reluctant to accept Swarup’s description of Dharavi where the narrator goes to live halfway through the novel:

Dharavi is not a place for the squeamish... Its open drains teem with mosquitoes. It’s stinking, excrement-lined communal latrines are full of rats... Mounds of filthy garbage lie on every corner, from which ragpickers still manage to find something useful. And at times you have to suck in your breath to squeeze through its narrow claustrophobic alleys. (*Q&A* 134)

In their description of Dharavi, the largest slum in Asia, situated at the heart of the city of Mumbai, Swarup and Boyle emphasise the glaring contrasts between extreme poverty and wealth, archaism and modernity. Moreover, Swarup underlines, as Dickens



did in his time, the cancerous nature of the slums amid the modern skyscrapers and neon-lit shopping complexes of Mumbai (*Q & A* 135). Swarup brings together in one textual image two realities that Boyle juxtaposes in his adaptation, by contrasting the slums of the opening sequences of *Slumdog Millionaire* with the modern skyscrapers repeatedly shown at the end of his film. Danny Boyle and Vikas Swarup's Dickensian reading of India's economic and financial centre thus seems to have simultaneously managed to appeal to large audiences all over the world – doubtless attracted by this entertaining and, to all appearances, authentic view of India – and to alienate the Indian's themselves who considered these representations of their country as false and symptomatic of a surviving Western desire to dominate the East by manipulating and controlling its image.

Strangely enough, the Indians seem to have been, on the whole, impervious to the film's message of hope and to the humour and drollery it contains. These two crucial features of the film, but also of the novel, are incidentally also typical of Dickens's spirit. They are exemplified by sequences of sheer comedy and pleasure in *Q & A* and in *Slumdog Millionaire*. Among such moments of pure delight features the opening scene of the film, where the children are shown playing on an airport runway, before being followed by the camera through the narrow streets of Dharavi, as they give policemen the slip. Another exulting episode in the film and in the novel is the scene where the children pretend to be official guides of the Taj Mahal and provide gullible tourists with fanciful and extravagant commentaries on the monument. Nevertheless, ignoring this aspect of the film, Bollywood star Amitabh Bachchan considered that "*Slumdog Millionaire* projected India as "(a) third-world, dirty, underbelly developing nation", while another critic, Meenakshi Shedde dismissed the film as "a laundry list of India's miseries" (qtd in Dhume). In this light, Dickensian references were seen as part and parcel of a strategy aimed at asserting Western cultural superiority over India through the promotion of a depressing image of the country as miserable and still steeped in poverty.

However, such postcolonial jibes are worth investigating. In fact, this censorious Indian perception of the film and of the Dickensian references it contains can in turn be criticised as a biased desire to turn a blind eye to the massive poverty which persists alongside undeniable and extraordinary growth: As Sadanand Dhume puts it, "India may boast homegrown programs in space exploration and nuclear power, but – as a first time visitor to India immediately notices and as the film mercilessly reveals – it also struggles to provide its people with electricity, sanitation and drinking water" (Dhume). In truth, *Q*

& A and *Slumdog Millionaire* can be seen, in spite of a slight sensationalist tendency to insist on the sordidness of daily life in Indian slums, as fairly accurate portrayals of this undeniable paradox of Indian growth which the Indians are so keen to ignore and which strongly calls to mind Victorian England and particularly Dickens's London. In fact the Indian interpretation of the film and its Dickensian references may be considered as symptomatic of what Sadanand Dhume calls "the chasm between the country's self-perception and projection and any reasonable measure of its achievements" (Dhume). This symptomatic self-perception resembles the Victorians' reluctance to consider the dark sides of progress.

While Dickensian references in *Q & A* and in *Slumdog Millionaire* awakened mixed feelings in the Indian public, they nevertheless successfully partook of the promotion of an Indian story on a global scale. Dickens's international popularity, in part owed to his most frequently reedited, translated and adapted novel, *Oliver Twist*, helped Swarup and Boyle achieve worldwide success. In this respect, Dickens can be seen as one among other ingenious choices and devices aimed at reaching a global public, on a par with the introduction of the quiz show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. This television show, which underlies the novel and film's synopsis, also ensures their worldwide recognition – albeit temporarily, since the programme is currently, but not lastingly, aired in almost every country. As a result, *Q & A* and *Slumdog Millionaire* demonstrate how the work of one of the most famous nineteenth-century writers can be unexpectedly and somewhat incongruously combined with references to a recent popular television game in order to serve a global marketing goal.

The novel and the film's astute fusion of Indian and Western references, aimed at reaching cross-cultural publics, partakes of what has been defined in film terminology as "cinematic clustering" (Cowen 87 qtd in Pandey), but could also be extended to texts as "textual clustering". In fact, the Dickensian allusions, the worldwide recognised quiz show – added, in the case of the film, to an international production team, which brought together a British director working in Hollywood, an Indian co-director, a British screenwriter, and Indian lead actors belonging to the India diaspora or stemming from the most cosmopolitan Indian cities (Dhume) – give the book and, to an even greater degree, the film, a truly global quality, emphasised by Joe Morgenstern in his review of *Slumdog Millionaire* for the *Wall Street Journal*. The previous observation show that, strangely enough, the image of India, in spite of the country's cultural vitality and its rapid

emergence on the word stage, still seems to need the mediation of references to the work of an author from the Western canon to be relayed to the world at large.

Besides their adaptations of the basic and typical Dickensian pattern of resilient street children and youngsters fighting to survive in Indian cities reminiscent of Victorian London, *Q & A* and *Slumdog Millionaire* also share essential structural features with Dickens's writing. *Q & A*'s meandering structure and its blending of antithetical genres resemble Dickens's early novels. Though Vikas Swarup's style and inspiration by no means equal the complexity and subtlety of his Victorian counterpart, he shares many narrative strategies with Dickens. *Q & A* resembles Dickens's early works with their meandering plots teeming with incidents. Though kept together by the unwinding of the quiz show, Swarup's plot progresses haphazardly moving back and forth unexpectedly, in a rather bewildering manner, and it forces the reader to work out the precise chronology of events. This tortuous and digressive structure is, in many ways, comparable to Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*, all the more so as Swarup, like Dickens, introduces interpolated tales within the main story narrated by his hero. On the other hand, this typically Dickensian rambling structure disappears in the film version, which is more closely knit and establishes order where the novel regularly deceives the reader's expectations.

Another Dickensian strategy, which can be found in *Q & A* and, to some extent, in the film, is the mixing of genres, which, as has already been mentioned, includes the combination of different media. This narrative device might at first sight be considered as a transposition into an Indian novel of a typical feature of Dickens's writing, epitomised by the famous sentence on streaky bacon in *Oliver Twist*. This sentence summarises the singular combination of melodrama, comedy, and tragedy, romance and suspense to be found in Dickens's novels and in many novels of the time. It aimed at reflecting the diverse and often incredible side of reality (*OT* XVII). However, a loose storyline and the mixing of genres are by no means merely Dickensian. They happen to be part and parcel of Indian culture. As a matter of fact, they are a key element of popular Indian plays of the end of the nineteenth century, and later of Hindi films, sometimes called, for that very reason, "masala movies" (Chiru-Jitaru 97). Some articles on *Q & A* and its adaptation have therefore claimed that Dickens had been "bollywooded" (Wadehra), but in fact Dickens's novels already contained the blending of genres which Swarup and Boyle are thought to have imposed upon them. Consequently, Swarup's novel and, up to a point, Danny Boyle's

film can be seen neither as a colonisation of Indian cultural productions by Dickensian themes and narrative strategies nor as an Indianisation of Dickens's work, but as subtle combinations of Dickensian references with local and traditional Indian culture.

At the end of the day, this creative process at work in *Q & A* and in *Slumdog Millionaire* can be seen as a way of representing Indian twenty-first-century life in all its variety and paradoxes. The novel and its adaptation combine a variety of Dickensian references and strategies in subtle and different ways, which reveal how strong but also how complex Dickens's influence still is today, and how it can be used to endeavour to understand and represent new and seemingly disconcerting social and cultural phenomena, like tentacular Indian megalopolises. A question however remains as to the relevance of this blend of Dickensian allusions and Indian culture. If, as Neil Davie has shown in an article entitled "History Artfully Dodged? Crime, Prisons and the Legacy of "Dickens's England", Dickens's fictional London drew more from other fictional tropes than from reality, then what can it possibly tell us about today's India? The answer lies in paying close attention to what Davie calls the "multi-layered complexity of [Dickens's] narrative strategies and use of fictional tropes", which point to Victorian imaginary constructions about reality just as much as to substantiated historical facts. This "stereoscopic view" can be convincingly applied to *Q & A* and to *Slumdog Millionaire*. In both of these works, Dickensian references are used to reveal stark contrasts within Indian society, to reflect Indian anxieties about the country's identity and, last but not least, to flesh out Western imaginary constructions about India.

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